REVERSING SAMOAN LANGUAGE SHIFT

Paper presented by:

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December 10, 2003

INTRODUCTION

In this paper[1], I will talk about language shift and how language shift can lead to language death. I will then discuss language shift in relation to the Samoan language. This will be followed by suggestions on how this shift can be reversed. More specifically, I will talk about the need for a language plan that will make sure that the Samoan language remains a strong link among the peoples of Samoa.

1. How do languages die?

A number of years ago, I was participating in a language restoration project at an Australian Aboriginal community. This was a government reservation and so originally there were many Aboriginal languages spoken in the community, but slowly, many of these languages began to decline. People preferred to speak Aboriginal English instead. I was working on restoring one language. There were only two speakers of that language remaining. As far as anyone knew, Fred and Jim (not their real names), were the last two speakers of these languages. Every evening, I would sit down with them and we would go over a list of vocabulary, some grammar and some songs. I had a tape recorder and would tape them, but sometimes I would write their words down in phonetic script – a way of writing that linguists use to capture accurate speech. Sometimes, during the day, Fred and Jim would take me out into the bush and tell be traditional "dreamtime" stories about the plants, the hills, the rivers. They would also tell me about the bush medicines – the plants that could heal; and the "bush tucker" – plants and animals that could be eaten, but, for some plants, only at certain times of the year. I loved doing this kind of thing because I knew that when Fred and Jim died, their language and this important cultural knowledge would at least be preserved so that future community children could get a

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[1]This is a draft of a "presentation version" of a paper that could be developed into a formal report.

portion of the thousands of years of knowledge that were stored in the language.

It came time for me to leave. The last evening, Fred and Jim and I were sitting on the grass when Fred asked how my sound writing worked. I showed him some examples. He asked me if he gave me a word, would I be able to write it exactly. I told him I could. But I said I could also record the word. He said that he wouldn't want this word recorded. It was a special word.   Then Fred and Jim had a long discussion. Finally Fred said he was going to give me an important ceremonial word that needed to stay alive – and he was afraid that when he and Jim were dead, that the word would disappear. He wanted me to carry the word – to look after the word. I said that it would be better for another Aboriginal person to carry the word, but he insisted that I carry it. I felt that he was going to give me an important responsibility. He told me the word. I wrote it down. He asked me to repeat it back to him. We made some adjustments. When he thought I had it right, he told me about the word by telling me a story. He told me that I have to keep the word sacred and not tell anyone about it until well after Fred and Jim were dead. I don't have time to tell the story – but I realized that this particular word had incredibly important meaning for thousands of people over thousands of years.

A few years ago, both Fred and Jim passed away. Sometimes I find where I'd written the word and say it out loud a few times. I think that is what Fred meant when he asked me to keep the word alive. This whole event has taught me how important it is to preserve the language of peoples. If you were the last speaker of your language, what word would you give as the final word of Samoan or English?

So how did Fred and Jim's language die? Sadly, it followed a typical path taken by many languages. The language came into contact with a colonial language (English) spoken by people who simply assumed that the people they colonized would speak English. During the colonizing process, the traditional social and cultural structure of Fred and Jim's "tribe" was decimated. Beginning in the 1960's, English speaking Australians began to realize the value of maintaining Aboriginal languages and ways of life, but by that time, it was too late for Fred's language. There were fewer and fewer adults speaking the language as their first language especially to children. Children did not acquire adult levels of proficiency and so they preferred to speak English – a language that seemed to bring with it lots of material possessions and "fun." Parents saw that if their children spoke English, they could have more and more control over their lives in the ever-encroaching English speaking world. Schooling was in English. Television was in English. Just about everything that people wanted to do outside the small Aboriginal community was in English. And so subconsciously, people began to use less and less of their language and more of English. Their language became something that old people talked in – a social curiosity. And then the old people died.

2.   Could language death happen to the Samoan language?

Linguists call the process that leads to language death, "language shift." Some linguists believe that language shift just happens as a potential natural consequence of people coming together. To some extent this is true, especially when one of the contact languages assumes a dominating role in the contact, and if there is no conscious effort to reverse the language shifting or moving toward the dominating language. Unfortunately, the Samoan language is very vulnerable to language shift toward English which could eventually lead to the loss of the Samoan language.

3.   Why is the Samoan language so vulnerable to language shift?

Time does not permit a complete discussion on all the factors that can lead to language shift. I have listed some of the more relevant ones below.

1.   The economic, cultural and political power of the English language.

For the first time in the world's history, the world has a true international language – the English language. Many estimates suggest that approximately 90% of the world's current and new scientific, educational, social scientific, technological, business, economic, media information is stored in and through the English language. This means that if I am a scientist in China and I want access to the newest information, the only way I can access that information is through the English language. If I am a businessman (or woman) from Japan and I want to sell something to Mexico, I must conduct my business in English. The most popular mass media events such as movies, songs and television programs are delivered in the English language. Generally speaking, to be educated in most of the world's nations means, in part, an ability to function in the English language. These facts alone mean that English has incredible power among the world's languages. Some linguists label this phenomenon as "linguistic imperialism". This accusation could be valid if native English nations consciously attempted to impose English on the world in some giant linguistic conspiracy. However, the spread of English seems to have come about as a result of technological and political changes that have made the world a smaller place – and which have produced a natural need for an international language. And that language is English. The economic and cultural power of English alone would be enough to create a situation where Samoan was threatened by English. But there is more.

2.   The English language in relation to Samoa

In addition to the spread of English, Samoan has increased vulnerability because the Samoan Islands were colonized by English speakers. This colonization produced a situation where the Samoan people were "modernized" through the

English language. English became the language of the institutions – the schools, the government, international business, and important literacy events. To some extent, a "diglossic" situation began to develop. This means that perceived important or powerful communication was carried out in English while less important communication such as exist in family and community relationships were developed in Samoan. Furthermore, geographically, Samoa is surrounded by English speaking nations or states. To the northeast is Hawaii and the U.S. To the south is New Zealand and to the west is Australia. Most of Polynesia is heavily influenced by the English language. Immigration to the English speaking world is relatively easy resulting in many Samoan families having relatives who have undergone partial or complete Samoan language loss to English. For many Samoans, English has become the only language that enables complete communication to the extended family.

So Samoan is doubly vulnerable to language shift. I cannot predict the future, but based upon these factors, and upon what I and others have observed, it seems to me that if there is not some form of serious intervention, the Samoan language will slowly erode.

Richard Littlebear, is president of Chief Dull Knife College in Montana. Last year, I heard him share his personal reflections on "How it Feels to be Losing Your Own Language."[2] First in his native Cheyenne and then in English, he told us a Cheyenne story about how all the animals were holding a conference. All the mammals met in one section of the conference. All the birds in another, and so on. A bat arrived and went to the mammal section. It was told it didn't belong here in that section and it should go to the bird section. So off it went, only to be told it didn't belong here as well. Finally, after being rejected by numerous sections, the bat retired to the darkest section of a cave, wrapped its arms around itself and hung upside. That, he said, is how it feels to be losing your own language. He added that many Cheyenne children are Cheyenne, but don't speak Cheyenne so many Cheyenne think they "don't belong here." But when they go to English speaking Americans, they are told that they "don't belong here" as well. Among many poignant thoughts, one that impressed me was, "When a language dies, it doesn't stink." It quietly fades away, unnoticed at first.

4.   How can language shift be reversed?

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[2]See Eggington, W. "When a language dies, it doesn't stink." In *TESOL Matters*, Washington, DC: TESOL Publications, June 2002.

Fortunately, in recent years a lot of attention has been focused on language shift as well on attempts to reverse language shift. Researchers are beginning to understand what helps reverse language shift and what doesn't help. The most comprehensive work on Reverse Language Shift (RLS) has been done by Joshua Fishman[3] and his colleagues. In addition, a recent issue of the journal *Current Issues in Language Planning* was devoted to language revival. The issue contains a paper written by the present author.[4]

One of the first steps that needs to be taken when attempting to reverse language shift is to determine the present state of language shift. With respect to the Samoan situation, we need to discover how much Samoan has been lost to English. Currently, Samoan seems to be under attack in two contexts: the first being a Samoan as native language context as can be found in Independent Samoa and American Samoa. The second context involves Samoan as an immigrant language as can be found among Samoans living in the U.S. (including Hawaii), New Zealand and Australia. Fishman's "Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale (GIDS)[5] suggests 8 stages of reversing language shift. In Figure 1, I have adapted this scale to fit the particular Samoan situation, and to make the technical language more accessible to lay readers. I have taken some educated guesses in the comments because one of the problems that needs to be addressed is that we don't know enough about the state of the Samoan language in many communities. I will discuss this problem later in this paper.

As suggested in Figure 1, Samoan is currently operating on the GIDS at different levels depending on the particular context. In places such as Los Angeles or Sydney, there are probably many examples of Stage 7 where Samoan is only used by the older generation.

A few years ago when I visited American Samoa, some teachers told me that one of the

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[3]See Fishman, J. *Reversing Language Shift.* Clevedon: Multilingual Matters 1992; and J. Fishman (ed.), *Can Threatened Languages Be Saved?* Clevedon: Multilingual Matters 2001.

[4]Eggington, W. Language Revitalization Planning within a Power/Solidarity Framework. In *Current Issues in Language Planning* Vol 2: 2&3, 2001.

[5]See Fishman, 1992, 2001.

biggest dangers to Samoan is that Samoan children from Stage 7 situations are returning to American Samoa in order to acquire Samoan, but ironically they indirectly increase language shift toward English. Such are the many complexities of the language shift phenomena.

The GIDS has been applied to many reverse language shift situations. Probably the situation that more closely resembles the Samoan context is the language reversal of Maori in Aotearoa/New Zealand. Benton and Benton[6] describe how, by 1989, Maori was "teetering on the brink of Stage 8", but that, by 2001, 17% of Maori children under the age of 15 could speak Maori. This is a significant move in the direction of the crucial Stage 6, but also indicates that much more needs to be done. Fortunately, in both Independent Samoan and American Samoa, language shift toward English has yet to progress beyond Stage 6, but in the Samoan immigrant situations, much can be learned from the Maori experience.   Probably the most significant Maori foundational approach

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[6]See Fishman 2001: 423

FIGURE 1: STAGES OF REVERSING LANGUAGE SHIFT FOR SAMOAN

SAFE FROM LANGUAGE SHIFT TOWARD ENGLISH

1.   Education, work sphere, mass media and governmental operations even at higher (adult) and national levels are conducted in Samoan.
> *Comment: This is a level of Samoan influence that would ensure the long term stability of the Samoan language. English would be taught as a foreign language such as it is in Japan. Perhaps this stage reflects some current areas of Independent Samoa.*

2.   Local mass media and government services are conducted in Samoan.
> *Comment: This is probably a desirable bilingual stage. Samoan performs many important powerful functions in the society thus requiring high levels of Samoan proficiency by all Samoans while still allowing for English acquisition.*

3.   The local work sphere functions in Samoan even by those who speak English as a first language.
> *Comment: Also a desirable stage. Native English speakers would need to acquire Samoan in order to function in Samoan society.*

4.   B. Public schools for Samoan children offer some instruction in Samoan, but much of the curriculum is designed to foster English proficiency instead of Samoan proficiency.
> *Comment: This appears to be the case in much of American Samoa.*
A. Special schools are available that teach in Samoan for Samoan children.
> *Comment: Children can attend these schools instead of going to English only public schools.*

5.   Schools available to help Samoans read and write in Samoan, but all other schooling is in English.

6.   The home, family and neighborhood functions in Samoan, but all other sectors of the community function in English.
> *Comment: This could be the situation in American Samoa in a few generations. This is a threshold stage. If language shift is not reversed, it is almost a guarantee that Samoan will be lost.*

7.   The only people functioning in Samoan are the older generation. All others function in English.
> *Comment: This could be the situation in parts of the U.S. N.Z., or Australia.*

8.   Samoan is almost lost but there are some attempts to revive it by reconstructing the language and teaching it.

SAMOAN ALMOST A DEAD LANGUAGE

that can be applied to the Samoan language context involves the development of a comprehensive language plan. As the following section will indicate, the development of a general language plan followed by more specific language education plans is essential to any attempt to reverse language shift among the Samoan speaking peoples.

5.   Reverse Language Shift and Language Planning

Language planning occurs when a governing agency recognizes a language-related problem and attempts to address that problem through planned action. What follows is a suggested method of developing a language plan that I have used elsewhere.
How does a language plan develop?
Generally speaking, there are two ways that a language plan can develop: informally and formally.

1.   Informal language planning is usually based upon the often ill-informed, sometimes ideological, positions of those administrators who happen to be on the scene when the language problem presents itself. It often results in the implementation of plans that are coercive in nature, and/or create results that compound the problem rather than solve it.[7]

2.   Formal language planning follows a well-established model where recommendations are offered, policies developed and plans implemented based upon as much empirical evidence as possible within a consensus building framework. Because everyone affected by the plan is a language "expert" to some degree, they often have very personal, sometimes contradictory, views on language acquisition. This means that the consensus building approach must be based upon objective empirical evidence.

The underlying philosophy of any formal language plan is that the recommendations of the plan will not be implemented successfully unless those affected by the plan are fully involved in the development of the plan. This "bottom-up" approach (as opposed to a top-down, somewhat imperialist approach) assures that there is a personal commitment

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7   See Eggington, W. "Unplanned language planning." In R. Kaplan (ed.), *Oxford Handbook of Applied Linguistics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 404-414. 2001.

and ownership of the plan – a crucial element especially in the plan's implementation phase, and especially after the "freshness" of the plan wears off. Finally, the implementation phase of a formal language plan always includes on-going evaluation of the plan, thus making it possible for following generations to be involved in any future adaptations of the plan.

A language plan begins its development by following the following accepted stages:

1. an evaluation of current language behavior and behavior toward language in the speech community[8] through the administration of various survey types,
2. the development of a survey report,
3. the development of language policy decisions
4. the development of an implementation plan
5. the execution of that plan
6. on-going feedback with respect to evaluating the plan, the policy decisions and the implementation of the plan.[9]

3. Evaluation of current language behavior includes collecting data concerning:

1. the language proficiency of the speech community in both Samoan and English,
2. the language use of the speech community in all relevant languages – i.e., who uses what language to whom, when, where, how much and for what purposes,
3. the language acquisition processes involved in the speech community.

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[8] For the purposes of reversing Samoan language shift, the speech community would consist of all segments of the Samoan language community including residents of Independent Samoa, American Samoa and the various Samoan immigrant communities..

[9] Kaplan, R., and R. Baldauf, 1997. *Language Planning: From Practice to Theory.* London: Multilingual Matters. p. 107.

4.   Evaluation of current behavior toward language includes collecting data concerning:

      1.   attitudes with respect to relevant languages and language speakers,
      2.   motivations to acquire relevant languages,
      3.   motivations to associate with relevant language speakers,
      4.   attitudes toward current formal and informal language policies,
      5.   attitudes toward possible options in any formal language plan.

5.   Collecting quantitative language behavior and behavior toward language data requires the administration of a number of written surveys addressed to various segments of the speech community. The surveys can be designed, field tested and administered by a survey-design committee. In some cases, these surveys can be administered using the web by having respondents log on to a restricted web page and take their assigned survey. This allows for the easy tabulation of results.

6.   Collecting qualitative language behavior and behavior toward language data involves the administration of a number of focus groups involving representative samples of the speech community, as well as interviews with key representatives of the speech community. The focus group design and administration can also be developed and evaluated by a survey committee.

7.   When both quantitative and qualitative data is collected and analyzed, a survey report committee issues a results report. This same committee can begin the process of making recommendations that will be presented to all segments of the speech community for their feedback.

8.   Once this feedback is collected, a final report can be issued containing recommendations based upon an informed consensus of the speech community.

6.   Conclusions and Recommendations

My major recommendation to those concerned about Samoan language shift would be to develop an on-going language planning process based upon firm empirical data. This approach can only come about if the various governments responsible for Samoan speaking peoples coordinate their efforts and resources. James Crawford offers a number of language shift hypotheses that were originally developed for Native American situations.[10] However, many of them are applicable to the Samoan language context. I will conclude by listing them without comment and suggest it might be helpful to engage in discussion concerning each one of them.

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[10]Crawford, J. *At War With Diversity: U.S. Language Policy in an Age of Anxiety.* Multilingual Matters. 2000: 67-81.

Hypothesis 1: Language shift is very difficult to impose from without.

Hypothesis 2: Language shift is determined primarily by changes internal to language communities themselves.

Hypothesis 3: If language choices reflect social and cultural values, language shift reflects a change in those values.

Hypothesis 4. If language shift reflects a change in values, so too must efforts to reverse language shift.

Hypothesis 5: Language shift cannot be reversed by outsiders, however well meaning.

Hypothesis 6: Successful strategies for reversing language shift demand an understanding of the stage we are currently in.

Hypothesis 7: At this stage in the United States, the key task is to develop indigenous leadership.